

PGPD RESEARCH PAPER

Pakistani Art in the Digital Age

By examining the artworks of relevant contemporary Pakistani artists, this paper will discuss if Digital Art can be considered to be the new ambassador to reflect the Art in Pakistan in the near future. The research will be based on the investigation of different factors and obstacles to Digital Art.

Abstract:

In our current Information age, global influence reaches the artist rapidly and imparts a transformation in more ways than it used to be. Such influences provoke an artist to approach his artwork differently, so that he can find new ways to express his creativity.

This paper investigates whether there is a change in the Identity of Pakistani Art, as today's artist in Pakistan are choosing more and more to use less traditional methods and mediums in their artwork as a mode of expression deviating from the traditional representation of Pakistani Art.

This research paper will start by giving an introduction about the Arts in Pakistan and continues by analyzing contemporary artists, which have used New Media in their artworks. The paper will shed light onto their contribution to the contemporary Art scenario in Pakistan by discussing their approach to their respective artworks and the effect it had in Pakistan.

This paper will end by coming to a successful conclusion about whether we can safely say that in near future Digital Art will be considered as the new language of Pakistani Art.

Content:

Art changes with the shift in culture and society, which comes with the alteration in our surrounding by means of technological advancements, innovations and global influences, resulting in an altered approach of the artist to execute his practice.

For the acceptance of a new art form, it is necessary that some factors are considered; the social acceptance of an artist, representation and execution of the artwork as well the feedback an art form receives from the masses. The society and culture comprises of social, cultural and religious conventions, the critique of the audience and art critiques, which accept or reject a new medium. Depending on the response and opinion, might they be negative or positive resulting in the doom or rise of the new art medium, as well other obstacles that hinder the art to flourish; negligence in the educational system and adhering to the traditional styles and mediums.

Art in Pakistan comprises all the elements generally known all around the globe but with the difference that most of the art forms are not expressed as extensively as painting or sculpture has been worked in and on. For many years artists have been using these mediums of art-making to execute their creativeness, contributing to Pakistan's Art. Pakistan's Art has encountered various forms of alteration throughout the last 58 years after its formation, from symbolism to abstraction until now (Naqvi,1998), the period of experimentation with the increasing technological and scientific innovations. Pakistan has been a post-colonial country, which had to establish its own Identity after the partition

Upto this day, Pakistani Art is a 'loosely defined entity'.(Mirza,Vasl 2006).For every art there is a common feature that instigates changes and shifts towards a new form and art. Benjamin points out in his essay that the shift in a society gives rise to a new art form determined by nature as well' historical circumstances'(Benjamin, 1936), which in the case of Pakistan is ' independence', a 'unique feature' of this countries art.(Mirza,2006 b) Most of the emphasis has been put on different visual art forms in the Pakistani Art. Whether it is sculpture, oil painting or miniature painting which has 'become the brand ambassador of Pakistani art at international level'.(The Hindu, 2003).With those traditional mediums ruling the Pakistani Art world, is it possible that Digital Art makes it way and replaces them forming a new Identity of Pakistani Art? It is necessary to analyze the new attempts being made by Pakistani artist in reference to the factors and obstacles, to find out the answer for this question.

Art has a deep connection with its surrounding and environment. Artists respond to it respectively by absorbing the new concepts and methods. As time and technology alter, our concept changes with the use of new media resulting in a change in approach of the artwork responsible for a new style of art-making.

The role of electronic media and the digital environment plays a vital part and go hand in hand with the transformative nature of an Art. With all the technological systems, software, facilities, the internet as a vast repository of information and resources and the mobile technologies, these present technologies facilitate our living in every aspect. We are a part of this contemporary digital environment without any effort done by oneself except in adapting to it and making use of it. Why is it that still the Art in Pakistan is not making a leap towards this Digital Art field scenario? The New media has the major influence of all, which diffuses into our life with unlimited opportunities than before when traditional practices were common. Multiplicity ways of executing an artist's visual thought into the final product are made available. It is the artist necessity to get this thought into the final artwork that drives him to use new methods. Does this mean that this drive in the artist is lacking and is an obstacle of making Digital Art as the contemporary Art in Pakistan or is it the ignorance of the artist to accept changes to their Art just because staying with the old pattern is like playing safe in the Art scenario?

Mirza truly describes the well-known state of the local artist in Pakistan in his essay, saying "Due to their shyness, self-indulgent behavior or general disinterest in the world beyond studio and gallery; they prefer to remain away from the circle of media"(Mirza,2006 d).Is this kind of attitude being an obstacle for Digital Art to establish itself? Or is it the society, culture and the convention that reject these new approaches? Let us analyze the different aspects further to find the answer, like Jarvis suggested that 'the most important thing about digital art is not how it looks, but who is making it and why.'(Jarvis, Towards a digital aesthetic). Hence his statement can serve us as a map to survey the present New Media artists from Pakistan.

Contribution of Artists:



"Catalog Image" by Sabina Gillani

Sabina Gillani, printmaker by profession exhibited her artwork comprising digital prints. Her Prints are a fusion of traditional and digital medium. She creates her digital prints by painting miniature painting over photographs and adding layers of watercolor washes onto it and afterwards the final piece is then completely printed in digital format. Sabina Gillani proved that the integration of digital medium with analog technique, a rather new concept for Pakistan's art, can make its way while carefully treating the artwork by respecting and following the existing conventions. Her artwork still has the appearance of a painting or photograph and that might be the reason it was accepted. Her work earned much appreciation from critiques, curators as well audience. Unlike Farhan Lodhi who created an 'uneasiness in the viewer' (Mirza,2005)

Asian artist and architect Faran Lodhi, exhibited a solo show called 'seven-seven'. His attempt to bring this new medium near the audience in the form of interactive installation and video projections received hard critique and was stamped to have failed to represent it as art. (Mirza,2005) reason for failure given by art-critique Quddus Mirza was that Pakistan's society 'is not accustomed to view and admit anything new in art' and is 'comfortable with the perpetual production of landscapes and calligraphic painting' (Mirza,2005) and its 'society is an archaic establishment, with its ideas' and 'prejudices' (Mirza,2006 f). Biased opinions about what art should be, what it should look like, and what is considered as Art in Pakistan makes it difficult to establish this new form of Art. According to Mirza his exhibition did not find much appreciation because he failed to turn reality into art. (Mirza,2005). Art itself is a language on its own to communicate a meaning, but the reason for the failure of Lodhi's artwork might not be due failure of conveying the meaning but instead we could argue that the failure of Lodhi's artwork might be due to the religious conventions in Art, as Pakistan being an Islamic country is one of the reasons why this rather personal art might have failed. This somewhat alien interactive participatory representation of art to the society of Pakistan

where traditional mediums and strict conventions rule might be accepted if the social status of the artist is of high profile and recognized by the society. This leads us towards this status issue.

While approaching the issue of the recognition of artists in a culture where the status of the artist is distinct by being recognized old senior masters, the question remains whether it is possible that artists practicing and exhibiting Digital Art can establish a place for this Digital field in this country. Where famous traditional painters are still celebrated and are occupying the space for this new globally developing field and upcoming artists working with this medium are working their way through. If we talk about well-acclaimed artist we analyze Shazia Sikander's work to challenge Mirza's statement regarding prejudice being the cause for not letting Digital Art making its way in this countries Art world by agreeing with this quote cited by Martinez and truly describing Shazia Sikander's approach

"It is natural for people to begin with the things closer to them. You utilize that, and it is part of the creative approach. But you have to get to experiment and explore new ideas. You go beyond classification, and in the end you are competing with the world, not just with other Indian artists." (Martinez., Cited in Third text 2005 ,p:252)

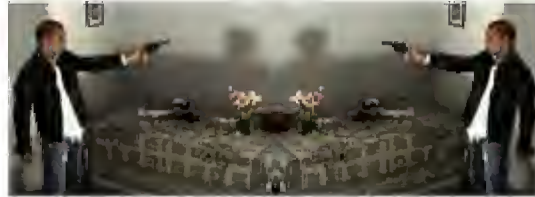


Pursuit Curve by Shazia Sikander

Shazia Sikander is an US based Asian artist and a pioneer of contemporary miniature painting in Pakistan. She is well known for her traditional miniature painting and her recent artworks involve the integration of digital techniques into the traditional medium. Sikander paints every stage of her miniature, layer by layer, and after wards scans them onto the computer and composes it in a narrative style resulting in an animation.

It is obvious from the artworks of Sikander, in content and execution, that this transformation in her approach is slowly forming a new Identity of Pakistan's art, independent from prejudice opinions, biased ideology of art existing within the country .One might argue that she has an internationally acclaimed status, as recently she received the Mac Arthur Award (Daily Times,2006 a) this is why her work is still getting positive critique in Pakistan and is well accepted by the society, but yet again in our opinion the reason why this new re-invented version with digital technique found much appreciation was because she strictly kept to the conventions of miniature painting (Daily Times 2006 a)and did not completely let the digital technique take over the traditional medium.(See figure) ,and on the same line making a difference and 'providing inspiration' for other upcoming artists.(Ali,S.H., 2006)

Arguing about the high acclaimed status and following conventions, are being the reason for acceptance, Rashid Rana`s work proves this aspect wrong.



Ten Differences, Rashid Rana ,2004, Video animation



All Eyes Skywards during the Annual Parade", 2004, Rashid Rana, digital print.

Rashid Rana, created a video animation 'ten differences' and digital prints 'All eyes skywards during the annual parade' in which he deals with themes surrounding contemporary issues, important to our times, with the assistance of new Media. For Rana New Media is all about truly expressing what is happening. When asked why Digital Art? , he stated that "If we can express ourselves better using a new Medium then why not use Digital Art ...after all photography too at one time was a new medium"(IANS,2006).Mirza claims that Video media is accepted by the society for pleasure but not for art-making(Mirza, 2006 a).It is evident that although Rana used a media like video, which is conventionally used as a domestic item in this country and rejected as a tool for art-making as 'Art', which is not considered and comprehended to be a painting (Mirza, 2006 a), still found acceptance. The reason is because this new visual language is

familiar for all those who watch TV.(ACP 2005). Hence breaking conventions; the representation of human body in an artwork or using a somewhat new visual language, does not necessarily come as an obstacle for Digital Art to be the new Ambassador for Pakistan's Art, as long as the work embodies its meaning to the audience, like in the case of Rana.

These artists who choose a distinctive approach towards their artwork by integrating, blending and merging the new media into their habitual and traditional medium, deviating from the traditional form of Pakistani Art and moving away from their routine course to create new profound ways to express their views, made it clear what is 'happening now in Pakistani Art and culture'(Mirza,2006 a).Their Art trajectories show having distinct approaches but being parallel at the same time and the content of their artworks reflect an unusual embodiment of contrasted medium as a distinctive new side of contemporary Art in Pakistan ;"Digital Art".

Contribution of Society and Culture:

Formal education has a great impact in the production of artworks and their aesthetic form giving rise to transformations. Agreeing with Dr.Ali that this countries 'Educational system neglects to incorporate art' into the courses (Ali,S.H ,2006), this is yet another obstacle to let Digital Art make its way in this country. We know that the comprehension of new media, its use and integration into the present Art is a vital part for the flourishing of this yet infant Art field, but this can only be done if the society (audience, art-curators and critics) opens critical discussions, has relevant exposure and builds strong foundations in institutions. Which Jarvis already concluded for Digital Art.

'...what is lacking in the critical arena, as well as, in the depth of the current majority of the art work found on the web is an established critical base for discussion and evaluation. Without this base of historical foundations and critical language there will be no discussion. Without this critical base, no digital artist will have a method of judging for themselves the merit and strength of their work. Without this self knowledge, digital artwork will always remain in the realm of the advertisement designer and the weekend hobbyist' (Jarvis,2000)

The Recent Art show '256 Shades' held at VM Gallery (a collaborative project between Vasl Pakistan and Artist Commune Hongkong) was possibly one of the first attempts to bring New media art to the audience in Pakistan and provide exposure to Digital Art (Ali,S. 2006), With the selection of a medium of the future these post partition artists are shaping the art scenario towards the digital, shifting old conventions and forming 'something which can become a new movement in this direction'(Mirza,2006 a)

The common factor necessary for the transition in the identity of Pakistani Art is this projection of other cultures art style by means of educational exposure in present digital time, as well the impact of changing trends and continental influence of other digital art forms, altering the representation of the traditional representation of Pakistan's Art.

For this, yet another major obstacle is Pakistan's censorship control over information and exposure, that gets into the country via those different Medias; restricted access to websites, censored books, which can not be delivered via shipment agencies, censorship

on TV broadcasting. So if the exposure is so limited and restricted, how is this digital field going to make its place in this countries Art world. According to Rasheed Arraen

“Art is also about thinking, about perception, and about the ability to innovate and create. It requires a free imagination to express its vision through a product that is original and has profound social meaning, not only for the individual but also for the community or society of which the artist is a member. If the dominant socio-cultural milieu of a society does not represent its own unique values, but instead only represents something that has been imported or imposed upon it from outside, it is hard for the artist to escape from it.”(Araeen, 2005, p.412)

Hence more global exposure and influence to artists and the society and culture they live in, will speed up the process of the acceptance of Digital Art within this country. Leading Digital Art to take its place and be considered the new language to reflect Pakistan’s Art. Beside this, once Digital Art takes its place it will serve many purposes beneficial to society and culture.

Utility of Digital Art in Pakistan:

These new works of female artists like Shazia Sikander, Hamra Abbas, Sabina Gillani etc. give us a bold statement of modern consciousness of today’s women belonging to a male-dominated society. They clearly indicate that the new media is not only shaping the Identity of this countries Art, but also plays a vital part in woman empowerment; liberating woman from constraints and creating a place for themselves equal to men.

In addition, an economical advantage is evident from the beginning attempts in Digital Art in Pakistan by available technology; less cost-effective art works are made available to art collectors as well common people (which forms the majority of Pakistan’s society) resulting in more exposure and spreading of this new Art. Further more, Digital Art might enhance the quality of the entertainment industry concerning the creation of educational animations for children as well.

Another aspect for the utility of Digital Art lies in using it as a tool for free speech in the form of political cartoon characters and animation, which now with the arrival and exposure of new media is visible on Pakistan Television already.

Conclusion:

What is necessary is to find a balance between the art forms without alienating them from each other and not destabilizing the foundations and loosing its individuality. Jarvis comments that for digital art to establish its place it has to move beyond mimicry (Jarvis an art lovers guide to digital art) It is evident from the discussed artworks, that this has already begun, hence it is possible for Digital Art to become the new language to reflect Pakistan’s art in future. Digital Art might replace traditional existing forms just like oil painting did when ‘there was a need ‘to develop and perfect this technique in order to express a particular view of life’ (Berger 1977, p:84) and will prosper ‘if enough individuals in society have a love for art’ (Berger 1977,p:84).

Time changes our life and we have to go along with it to create a rightful place and contribute to the global art world.

“Art is changing all the time. What was considered traditional at one time will not be later. Things change. People adopt new ideas. We carry on, but new ideas are incorporated and others are omitted. We have to be open to change changes as an individual, and open to creative change.” (Martinez,Cited in Third Text, p:257)

Until then the process of transition, in which these yet opposite techniques have not been distinguished, will serve to further the process of shaping Digital Arts place .

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